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ABSTRACT

This article describes the need for a test of the first 1,000 words of English, the essential vocabulary for simplified teaching material. It examines the development of basic word lists and the difficulties involved in testing the first 1,000 words. It then presents 2 versions of a 40-item true/false test that can be used to determine what proportion of the 1,000 words that learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) know. The results of the test can be used to help diagnose weakness, set learning goals, plan a vocabulary program, measure vocabulary growth, and assign graded reading. An appendix contains the two sample tests. (MDM)

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MEASURING READINESS FOR SIMPLIFIED MATERIAL: A TEST OF THE FIRST 1,000 WORDS OF ENGLISH

Paul Nation

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MEASURING READINESS FOR SIMPLIFIED MATERIAL: A TEST OF THE FIRST 1,000 WORDS OF ENGLISH

Paul Nation

The first 1,000 words of English are the essential basis for simplified teaching material. This article describes the need for a test of these words and the difficulties in making one. It contains two equivalent forms of a test along with instructions on how to use it and how to apply the information gained from it.

The Importance of High Frequency Words

Frequency studies of English have shown that the return for learning the high frequency words is very great. Generally these high frequency words are considered to be the most frequent 2,000 words (West, 1953) although some research indicates that the return for learning vocabulary drops off rather quickly after the first 1,500 words (Engels, 1968; Hwang, 1989). The return for learning is the coverage of text, spoken or written, that knowledge of the words provides. For example, Schonell et al (1956) found that the most frequent 1,000 words in spoken English provided coverage of 94% of the running words in informal conversation. Similarly, figures from the frequency count by Carroll et al (1971) indicate that the first 1,000 words of English cover 74% of written text. Note that coverage refers to running words where each recurrence of a word is counted as additional coverage. Thus, knowing the word the gives much less than 10% coverage of written text because this word occurs so frequently. Clearly the return for learning the first 1,000 words of English is very high. By comparison, the second most frequent 1,000 words of English provides coverage of only 7% of written text.

It should not be thought that the first 1,000 words is made up mainly of words like the, and, of, they, and because. These function words make up fewer than 150 of the 1,000 words.

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Lists Containing the First 1,000 Words

There are several lists available of the most frequent words of English. These include frequency counts (Carroll et al, 1971; Francis & Kucera, 1982; Thorndike & Lorge, 1944), and combinations of various lists (Hindmarsh, 1980; Barnard & Brown, in Nation 1984). The list chosen for this test is West's General Service List of English Words (1953). The General Service List has been used as a basis for many series of graded readers, and this provides an advantage in using it for the test. This list is rather old, based on work done in the 1930s and 1940s. However it still remains the most useful one available as the relative frequency of various meanings of each word is given. When making the tests included here the words chosen were checked against the Carroll et al count to make sure that they occurred in the first 2,000 words of that count.

Difficulties in Testing the First 1,000 Words

There are several difficulties involved with making a test of the first 1,000 words. The first is such a test may be used with classes of learners who speak different first languages and thus translation is not a practical approach. Second, there is the likelihood that some learners will have poor reading skills and thus the test needs to be able to be given orally if necessary. These two factors resulted in the choice of a true/false format. Multiple-choice was not possible because it is impractical in an oral form. One disadvantage of true/false is the possible strong effect of guessing, although research by Ebel (1979) indicates that this is not as likely as it seems. In an attempt to overcome possible effects of guessing, three types of responses were suggested in the instructions (True, Not true, Do not understand), and each word was tested twice, once in each version of the test. Where an item is tested twice, there are four possible sets of answers, namely both correct, both wrong, the first item correct and the second wrong, the first item wrong and the second correct. There is thus only a one in four chance of correctly guessing both items testing the same word. This is the same chance as with four-item multiple choice tests. So if the teacher feels that learners are making wild guesses, both forms of the test should be given and a mark given only when both items testing a word are correct.

A third difficulty is that the contexts for the tested words must not cause too many problems for the learners. When making the test, an attempt was made to ensure that the context words were of higher frequency than the tested word. This was not always possible for some of the words and thus a few words have some context words of the same frequency. There are no items with contexts of lower

frequency. Occasionally a picture was used to avoid a lower frequency word, for example:

This can keep people away from your house.

Dog is a lower frequency word than the test word keep and so a picture was used instead of saying:

A dog can keep people away from your house.

This frequency restriction on the context was the most difficult constraint to overcome when making the test.

A fourth difficulty is that most of the high frequency words have several meanings. In the test only the most frequent meaning was tested. This was found by referring to West (1953) and the COBUILD dictionary (Sinclair, 1987).

A fifth difficulty is that using true/false items where the judgement is based on general knowledge allows other factors besides vocabulary knowledge to play a part. Some items where this may occur include:

Some children call their mother Mama.

You can go by road from London to New York.

Each society has the same rules.

Some problems of this type were removed as a result of trialling the test. There is value, however, in having the words in context in that the context can help in accessing the meaning of the word as well as limiting the meaning that is being tested. The disadvantage of drawing on general knowledge is not as great as the advantage of testing in use rather than by definitions.

A sixth difficulty is the grammatical complexity of the context of the tested words. For example, several of the highest frequency items are tested in the two-clause pattern "When _____, _____". This was unavoidable. Trialling of the test helped find some items where this caused too much difficulty and these were changed.

Using the Test

Usually one form of the test (40 items) should be enough to get a useful result. When the test is given orally, the learners will need to be able to see the accompanying pictures. It is probably best if the test is given orally to one learner at a time. The teacher can repeat the items to the learners as many times as is needed. If the teacher knows the learner's first language then also requiring a translation would be a useful check. It is possible to find which word is tested by comparing the two items in the two forms of the test as both forms contain the tested words in exactly the same order. The ordering is based on frequency of occurrence according to West (1953) with the most frequent word (time) occurring first.

Only content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) are tested. To find what proportion of the first 1,000 words is known, multiply the total score on each version of the test (40 items) by 2.5. Multiplying by 2.5 assumes that the learners already know the same proportion of function words.

Applying the Results

The results of the test can be used to help diagnose areas of weakness, set learning goals and plan a vocabulary programme, measure vocabulary growth, and assign graded reading. Let us look at each of these in turn.

Diagnosis: The test can be used to help answer this question. Is the learner's poor performance in reading or listening a result of inadequate vocabulary knowledge? Some learners, particularly those for whom English is a foreign language, have difficulty understanding spoken English. This could be because they do not know enough vocabulary or simply because they have learned English through reading and have not had enough contact with spoken English. Giving the vocabulary test in its written form should help the teacher see where the problem lies. With such learners it would be interesting to give one form of the test orally and one form through reading to see what the difference was.

Similarly, learners who have had a lot of contact with spoken English may be poor at reading and doing the test orally should reveal their vocabulary knowledge.

Set learning goals: The first 1,000 words of English are essential for all learners who wish to use the language. It is thus very important that teachers know what vocabulary knowledge their learners have and are aware of how they can systematically help them to increase this knowledge. If learners do not know all of the first 1,000 words of English it is well worth ensuring that they have the opportunity to learn those that they do not know. Nation (1990) looks at this in detail over the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Ways of doing this include substantial graded reading, direct vocabulary teaching, doing vocabulary learning exercises, and systematically providing a vocabulary focus in language learning activities. If learners' vocabulary is larger than 1,000 words, the Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 1990) can be used.

Measure vocabulary growth: The two equivalent forms of the 1,000 word test allow the teacher to check how much learners' vocabulary has increased over several months. This use should be treated with caution as each test has only forty items and thus the confidence interval would be large if we were measuring an individual's increase in vocabulary size. When both forms of the test were administered to the same group of learners, it was found that the most difficult items in test A tested words that were also in the most difficult items in test B. These words were ancient, stream, remain, wide, and at least. It was also found that two-thirds of the learners gained scores on tests A and B that were within two marks or less of each other. Only one of the fifteen learners tested had scores which were more than four marks different.

Assign graded reading: Various series of graded readers have several stages of readers within the first 1,000 words of English. Longman Structural Readers, for example, have books written at the 300-word stage, the 500-word stage, the 750-word stage, and the 1,100-word stage. The way that the Longman series divides the words into stages does not correspond exactly to frequency (and thus to the ordering of items in the vocabulary test) but there is rough agreement. For example, the first 10 items in the vocabulary test are made up of one test word from Longman Stage 1, six from Stage 2, and three from Stage 3. Because the agreement is rough, it is better to use learners' total scores on the test to decide what stage of graded reader they should be reading. If their vocabulary score on a 40-item test is less than 10 they should be reading at Stage 1, from 11 to 20 Stage 2, from 21 to 30 Stage 3, and above 30 Stage 4. Graded reading is an excellent way of increasing vocabulary. By reading three or more readers at one stage learners are likely to meet all of the vocabulary at that stage. Having mastered the vocabulary of that stage, they can go to the next stage without needing extra preparation for the new vocabulary (Wodinsky & Nation, 1988).

The Content of Test Items

The items in a test which is not based on a particular piece of content knowledge inevitably reveal the personality of the test maker. Looking back over the items I see that some reflect my philosophical attitudes, "We can be sure that one day we will die" (Some learners seemed convinced that this was not true.). This same sense of inevitability is revealed in "Day follows night and night follows day" and "Your child will be a girl or a boy". I also see my jaundiced attitudes to children after having raised a family, "It is easy for children to remain still" (clearly not true), "Most children go to school at night" (perhaps that should be true), "A child has a lot of power" (true or not true? Unfortunately omitted). In the earlier versions of the test there was also a strong moral tone, "It is good to keep a promise", "It is not good to try hard", "You must look to find the way". However, although the learners did not seem to have trouble with these items, colleagues convinced me that these were culture bound and not in keeping with the tone of the last part of the twentieth century. I reluctantly changed some of them. It is after all easier to change test items than it is to change colleagues. After all, "A society is made of people living together".

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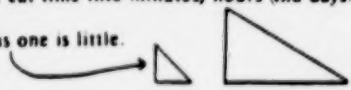
VOCABULARY TEST: 1,000 WORD LEVEL
TEST A

Write T if a sentence is true. Write N if it is not true. Write X if you do not understand the sentence. The first one has been answered for you.

We cut time into minutes, hours and days. _T_

This one is little.  ___

You can find these everywhere. ___

Some children call their mother Mama. ___

Show me the way to do it means "show me how to do it". ___

This country is a part of the world. ___

This can keep people away from your house. ___

When something falls, it goes up. ___

Most children go to school at night. ___

It is easy for children to remain still. ___

One person can carry this. ___

A scene is a part of a play. ___

People often think of their home, when they are away from it. ___

There is a mountain in every city. ___

Each month has the same number of days. ___

A chief is the youngest person in a group. ___

Black is a colour. ___

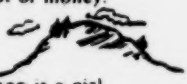
You can use a pen to make marks on paper. ___

A family always has at least two people. ___

You can go by road from London to New York. ___

___

Silver costs a lot of money. ___

This is a hill.  ___

This young person is a girl. ___

We can be sure that one day we will die. ___

A society is made of people living together. ___

An example can help you understand. ___

Some books have pictures in them. ___

When some people attack other people, they try to hurt them. ___

When something is ancient, it is very big. ___

Big ships can sail up a stream. ___

It is good to keep a promise. ___

People often dream when they are sleeping. ___

This is a date - 10 o'clock. ___

When something is impossible, it is easy to do it. ___

Milk is blue. ___

A square has five sides. ___

Boats are made to travel on land. ___

Cars cannot pass each other on a wide road. ___

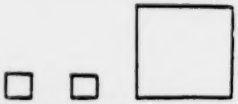
When you look at something closely, you can see the details. ___

This part is a handle. ___

VOCABULARY TEST: 1,000 WORD LEVEL
TEST B

:e T if a sentence is true. Write N if it is not true. Write X if you do not rstand the sentence. The first one has been answered for you.

We can stop time. _N_

Two of these are little.  ___

You must look, when you want to find the way. ___

When someone asks "What are you called?", you should say your name. ___

There are many ways to get money. ___

All the world is under water. ___

When you keep asking, you ask once. ___

Sometimes people die when they fall off a building. ___

Day follows night and night follows day. ___

Remain here means "stay". ___

This is a person. ___

When there is a change of scene, we see a different place. ___

Often means "many times". ___

This is a mountain. ___

Each month has a different name. ___

People follow the orders of a chief. ___

Green is a colour. ___

Dirty hands cannot leave marks on glass. ___

You need at least five people to make a group. ___

Cars move on a road. ___

You can eat silver. —

You can see more when you are on a hill. —

Your child will be a girl or a boy. —

When you are sure, you know you are right. —

Each society has the same rules. —

Three examples of food are, shops, homes, and markets. —

This is a picture. —

It is good to attack people. —

Rome is an ancient city. —

A stream is a small river. —

When you promise something, you say you will really do it. —

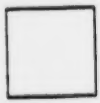
Dreams are about things that really happened. —

When we give a date, we say the day, the month and the year. —

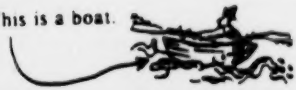
It is impossible to live for a long time without water. —

Very young children drink milk. —

This is a square. —



This is a boat. —



It is a short way from one side to the other side of a wide river. —

A detail is a small piece of information. —

A handle is part of our body. —

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